

# Learning and Teaching Cultural Competence in the Practice of Social Work

Carmen Ortiz Hendricks

**ABSTRACT.** Referencing Bertha Capen Reynolds' stages of learning and teaching the practice of social work, the author offers a conceptual framework for examining how supervisors and workers or field instructors and student collaborate in learning and teaching about cultural competence. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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In her classic work, *Learning and Teaching in the Practice of Social Work* (1942), Bertha Capen Reynolds discusses the process that social workers need to go through in learning and teaching about social work practice. "In the teaching and learning of a profession like social work, which involves meeting many experiences which are new, there are distinguished five stages of the use of conscious attention, related to the

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Carmen Ortiz Hendricks, DSW, ACSW, is Associate Professor, Hunter College School of Social Work, 129 East 79th Street, New York, NY 10021 (E-mail: [chendric@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:chendric@hunter.cuny.edu)).

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safety of the person as well as to the goal of mastery of the experience” (Reynolds, 1942, pp. 73-74). Reynolds’ five stages are:

Stage I	The stage of acute consciousness of self;
Stage II	The sink or swim adaptation;
Stage III	The stage of understanding the situation without power to control one’s own activity in it;
Stage IV	The stage of relative mastery, in which one can both understand and control one’s own activity in the art which is learned; and
Stage V	The art of learning to teach what one has mastered. (pp. 75-85)

Reynolds sees learning and teaching social work practice as intimately related, each influencing the other with much movement back and forth between stages. Workers do not learn in a linear fashion but rather they recycle through these stages frequently and at different times in their professional growth. The social work professional as a learner is intrinsically related to how she ultimately uses herself with clients. The art and science of social work is acquired through the integration of theory and practice in the classroom and the agency in parallel processes.

There are other models that address how adults learn about a profession. Towle (1954) conceptualized learning a profession as an emotional, maturational experience, and emphasized the student/mentor relationship as the primary vehicle for learning the culture of the new profession. Berengarten (1957) examined adult learning patterns including the “doer,” the intellectual-empathic, and experiential-empathic styles of learners. Knowles (1972) outlined the basic tenets of androgogy or the teaching of adult learners. Papell (1978) studied the learning styles of affective, cognitive and operational learners in direct social practice. Schon (1983) introduced the concept of the “reflective practitioner” and the qualities necessary to teach for reflective practice (1987). Saari (1989) suggested a five step developmental model in the process of learning clinical social work practice: (1) caring helps; (2) talking helps; (3) understanding helps; (4) reliving helps; and (5) reorganizing helps. Bogo and Vayda (1987) outlined preferred learning styles of adults based on Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning framework involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract concep-

tualization, and active experimentation. All of these theorists offer suggestions about how adults learn best, how they experience the learning process, and how teaching styles interact with learning styles. However, none of these authors, including Reynolds, considered how adults might learn to deal with cultural diversity.

Cultural competence does not come naturally to any social worker and requires a high level of professionalism and sophistication, yet how culturally competent practitioners are trained is not clear in professional education or practice. Some authors have exhorted the profession to require more than sensitivity training which only helps workers get in touch with their idiosyncratic responses to difference but leaves much to be desired in developing culturally competent knowledge or skills (Aponte, 1991; Chau, 1990; Latting, 1990; Hardy & Laszloffy, 1992; Mizio & Delaney, 1981). Only a handful of authors have tackled the issues inherent in supervising for culturally competent practice (McRoy, Freeman, Logan, & Blackmon, 1986; Solomon, 1982; Marshack, Hendricks, & Gladstein, 1994; Gladstein & Mailick 1986; Ryan, & Hendricks, 1989). Although these authors examine the cross-cultural interactions between workers and supervisors, they do not discuss how culturally competent supervision can lead to culturally competent practice.

This paper attempts to address the evolution and transmission of culturally competent practice as experienced by supervisors and workers or social work teachers and students. The author has taken the liberty of adapting and building upon Reynolds' model to more accurately reflect how social workers currently experience diversity and how they learn from and teach others to be culturally competent. These five stages parallel Reynolds' conceptualization and attempt to define the exact nature of culturally competent social work practice.

#### The Five Stages of Learning and Teaching Cultural Competence in the Practice of Social Work

Stage I	"I am so embarrassed. I am afraid of saying the wrong thing."	Cultural Self-Awareness
Stage II	"I jump in for better or worse, and hope for the best."	Cultural Sensitivity
Stage III	"Somehow, what I do works. I handle diversity encounters quite well, but I cannot explain why."	Beginning Cultural Competence
Stage IV	"I understand what I am doing and use a range of culturally competent knowledge, skills and values."	Relative Mastery of Cultural Competence
Stage V	"I can teach others to be culturally competent practitioners or supervisors."	Teacher/Learner of Cultural Competence

Reynolds' framework is easily translated to address teaching and learning cultural competence in social work practice. The model has many strengths: (1) it recognizes the need for conscious attention to new or diverse experiences encountered in everyday practice; (2) it helps social workers evaluate how far they have come and how much they still need to accomplish to become more culturally competent; (3) it provides a safe perspective from which workers and supervisors can question and assess their individual cultural competence; and (4) the model acknowledges that cultural competence requires stage-specific developmental steps for any success or relative mastery. Supervisors can utilize the framework to challenge workers at various levels of cultural competence, noting the stumbling blocks along the way, and being supportive of each worker's natural right of passage through these stages on the way to mastery of culturally competent knowledge and skills.

Culturally competent social work practice is, in most respects, simply good practice, thus teaching and learning about cultural competence goes hand in hand with teaching and learning about good practice. A social worker who is not culturally competent cannot be an effective worker nor an effective supervisor. Reynolds' conceptualization of stages helps practitioners and supervisors recognize that relative mastery takes time to develop and that social workers frequently know more than they can use in everyday practice. They often find themselves acting beyond their capacity to know a given situation (Lewis, 1982). Cultural competence in social work practice involves immediate responses to diverse situations and sufficient reflection on these experiences to develop some sophistication and confidence in one's ability to work with a range of constituencies, cultures, and conditions.

Stage I	"I am so embarrassed. I am afraid of saying the wrong thing."	Cultural Self-Awareness
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Social workers often confront situations they do not understand or they have difficulty relating to a person or situation because they lack memory, comparisons, or life experience with the other person's culture, language, oppression or privilege. These experiences throw a social worker into what Reynolds called a state of acute consciousness of self. The worker feels attacked by his lack of knowledge and experience, and his attention is on the self and self-preservation. As Towle (1954) puts it, ". . . the demands of professional education at times threaten the intactness of the self or ego, present heavy reliance on auto-

matic learning for mastery, and deplete energy” (p. 51). Some workers even retreat to a position of relative safety, avoiding uncomfortable situations or denying there is any difficulty. This stage of practice resembles stage fright as a social worker is tongue-tied, helpless or paralyzed in the face of an unknown situation, and simultaneously fearful or ashamed of not living up to some professional image of cultural competence.

Stage I may occur with young, new workers or re-occur with older, experienced workers. Discomfort often motivates social workers to go out of their way to provide quality services to clients, but workers need supervision to understand or appreciate the culturally competent knowledge, skills and values they can glean from the experience. If they are too acutely self-conscious they will not allow themselves to reflect on and learn from the situation. And because they lack knowledge of or experience with the “other’s” culture, they do not know how to use culture as a strength or resource in dealing with presenting problems. For example, an experienced Latina worker is assigned a young, gay, Latino client who has just learned that he is HIV+ and fears the reactions of his family and friends. The worker has to put aside her middle-age, heterosexual and religious values and beliefs in order to engage this client in a meaningful helping relationship. In the face of a strikingly new situation, the worker may be confused and insecure, and could revert to mechanical ways of working rather than offering this client genuine warmth and unconditional acceptance in helping him deal with his illness and his interpersonal relationships. “Unconscious distancing and defensive maneuvers are only a few of the unhelpful responses practitioners as well as clients may manifest in relation to perceptions of themselves as different from one another” (Pinderhughes, 1989, p. 21). The sense of emergency and the feelings of inadequacy in meeting the emergency can lead workers to extremes of behavior. The anger associated with the sense of helplessness may lead to belligerent responses such as becoming overly assertive or confrontational with clients. A common example is the worker whose voice gets louder when she cannot understand a client’s language or is confronted by a deaf client, or the worker who simply talks too much as a way of masking anxiety. These workers may be trying to cover up how inept they feel in the face of a new or uncomfortable situation. Some workers joke or use humor to ease their sense of self-consciousness, but they risk appearing biased or prejudiced in the eyes of their colleagues.

For the most part, workers try to ignore or keep to themselves such diversity encounters, but in actuality, there is a great deal to be learned during this stage. The fear, anxiety and discomfort provide supervisors

with an opportunity to help workers develop cultural self-awareness by examining their misguided efforts and pointing them in the right direction. For example, the intellectual thinkers or “cognitive” learners may need the assistance of books or journals to learn about a specific cultural group. Supervisors may encourage workers to read journals, but should also caution them about neatly encapsulated summaries of racial or ethnic groups which may give them instant but false cultural competence. More experiential workers may be helped by directing them to specialized seminars or training workshops. Supervisors could bring together workers of different cultural backgrounds to share their cultural experiences which may allow workers whose cultural backgrounds are similar to those encountered in practice to give expert testimony about their own growing cultural self-awareness. Workers may directly ask their supervisors to help them with cross-cultural experiences but, if supervisors avoid these discussions or if workers sense that their supervisors are as acutely self-conscious as themselves, these discussions end before they begin. If supervisors can see past the insecurities, fears, and anxieties of workers, they will not label their behaviors as culturally insensitive, but rather appreciate that the workers are simply protecting themselves against a threat from an unknown or new experience. The supervisor has to be there for workers in a “security-giving” role “helping the learner to find the solid ground of personal adequacy he already has on which to plant his feet while he struggles with the new experience” (Reynolds, 1942, p. 76). In reality, workers and supervisors together need to reach for a sense of personal adequacy which they already possess as educated, licensed and experienced practitioners. This begins with recognizing and celebrating their own cultural backgrounds and identities, and taking comfort in the positive and negative experiences associated with multiple cultural identities developed over time. “When practitioners are clear and positive concerning their cultural identities, they are more able to help their clients to be so also. It is not possible to assist clients to examine their issues concerning cultural identity and self-esteem if helpers have not done this work for themselves” (Pinderhughes, 1989, p. 19). Supervision is central to this work. In the arena of culturally competent social work practice, Stage I is common for all social workers and is generally short-lived.

Stage II	“I jump in for better or worse, and hope for the best.”	Cultural Sensitivity
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As workers struggle with Stage I, they learn some important things. They learn to appreciate and use their own cultural backgrounds and

identities in understanding others; they retreat less and less to “safe” positions; and they find they can mobilize themselves to respond and adapt to new situations somewhat effectively. Primarily, they learn to rely on some old, well-established tricks of the trade, such as start where the client is, actively listen, be non-judgmental, and encourage self-determination. As bewildered as they are by uniquely different or challenging situations in practice, workers are able to survive, “stay afloat,” and make some sense of practice situations. Reynolds saw this as the stage of sink-or-swim adaptation. This is also the beginning of cultural sensitivity. Workers experience enormous satisfaction when they hit upon the right response or get favorable reactions from clients. When an elderly Chinese client keeps her appointments or seeks out a young, African-American worker for services, the worker begins to experience himself as culturally competent. In Stage II, workers are still more sensitive to their own reactions than to the clients’ needs, but they are beginning to understand what might be expected of them, and beginning to develop culturally sensitive approaches to practice. Some workers become increasingly aware of the expectations for culturally competent practice and are initially overwhelmed and barely able to keep up with the demands. Supervisors need to provide a great deal of support and encouragement in Stage II which may last a long time and is characterized by approval seeking and dependence on supervisors for praise and direction. Workers may sound like they know what they are talking about, but their practice demonstrates ignorance of basic skills and knowledge. For instance, they may ask supervisors for politically correct vocabularies or formula responses thinking there is a right way or wrong path towards cultural competence. When their responses are insensitive or unacceptable to clients, workers need encouragement from supervisors to keep trying and to trust their spontaneous, genuine or intuitive responses. Workers are easily wounded when they suddenly find themselves back in Stage I or acutely self-conscious.

During Stage II, supervisors need enormous patience, acceptance, and non-judgmental attitudes towards workers. Supervisors have to make sure that the learning patterns of workers are understood, that support is given, and that criticism is handled with care and sensitivity. It is also essential that they challenge workers to increase their sense of mastery by helping them recognize the knowledge and skills they already possess, and by pointing out when they act in culturally appropriate ways. For example, a client was expressing his anger towards a racist employer, and suddenly said to the worker, “But you’re white so you don’t know how I feel.” The worker responded that she may not under-

stand what it is like to live with racism, but she let the client know that she believes racism exists and that we must all fight to eliminate it in our society. The supervisor helped the worker examine the pros and cons of her statement as well as look at alternative responses. This not only demonstrates specific ways in which workers can modify their patterns of behavior to suit new situations, but it also frees workers to trust themselves while examining their empathic responses. "Skilled teaching, at this stage, carries on the function of increasing security through mobilizing the knowledge and skills the learner already has, and encouraging him to trust and use his 'spontaneous' responses" (Reynolds, 1942, p. 77).

Workers have to be genuine, but they may also have to adapt to the demands of new situations beyond their experience, e.g. the female worker who tries to shake hands with a Hasidic man who by religious law can only touch two women, his wife and mother. Or the Latina organizer who has a familiar cultural and linguistic orientation with Latino clients but is not always prepared for the range of ethnicities represented in a Latino community where constituents come from different historical, social and political experiences. The workers' intentions may be honest but good intentions do not always translate into culturally competent practice. Workers need to struggle to trust themselves while becoming more self-reflective, and gradually accepting each new challenge as contributing to their growth and development as culturally aware and sensitive practitioners. Supervisors can best help workers by recognizing each accomplishment and reassuring them that they cannot learn culturally competent practice all at once. Or as McGill (1992) puts it, "The therapist cannot know everything about a particular culture, but must accept responsibility for knowing something about the culture" (p. 343). Cultural competence is mastered in stages. Achieving relative mastery takes time and involves continued growth in cultural self-awareness and the ongoing development of cultural sensitivity.

Stage III	"Somehow, what I do works. I handle diversity encounters quite well, but I cannot explain why."	Beginning Cultural Competence
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At this stage, workers have some cultural self-awareness and sensitivity but still lack understanding about the factors contributing to diversity in social work practice or why they successfully deal with diversity. In this stage, workers are increasingly moving "from preoccupation with the self to freedom to study the situation as it is" (Reynolds, 1942, p. 79). There are sudden moments of miraculous com-

prehension that surprise both workers and supervisors. This stage is characterized by workers saying things like, "All at once I knew what to say. It just came to me," or "It's really quite simple once you understand the client's reality." This is a difficult stage in learning and teaching cultural competence. Workers think they have mastered diversity, but are soon brought down to earth by new diversity challenges.

Conscious intelligence is more capable of dealing with new situations, but workers soon find out that this is not enough. Cognitive behavior does not always work in tandem with affective responses. Workers do not yet have a base of stabilized responses built up to rely on for each new situation. There is progress and there are set-backs. This is a stage of development when workers think they are performing well, are confident when confronting new situations, but then face an issue of diversity which they do not handle well, and regress to Stage I or "I am so embarrassed." For example, a white worker who considers herself a progressive feminist gives clients of color the impression that they are not assertive enough in dealing with partners in violent relationships. When members begin to miss group meetings, the worker blames the women for their passive resistance. The supervisor helps the worker see the implications of her white, middle class values when trying to understand the needs, capacities and opportunities of low-income women of color of varying ethnic backgrounds. The worker's comment is, "I need to go back to Group Work 101!"

Supervisors can become impatient with workers whom they know can do better, but who appear to have regressed again into old patterns of behaviors. Patience, support and reassurance from supervisors is vital to expanding workers' conscious intelligence and affective responses to a range of experiences. This stage can last a long time, years perhaps, but a great deal of learning can take place as workers honestly struggle to think for themselves, weigh their spontaneous responses, and consider a range of culturally appropriate interventions. Workers need supervisors to remind them that an insensitive remark or question does not mean total incompetence. Workers and supervisors need to honestly examine misinterpretations or misunderstandings and appreciate where they come from. For example, a social worker who is assigned as case manager for a developmentally delayed adolescent and becomes uncomfortable when the client makes statements like, "I want to go to college and become just like you." With the assistance of a supervisor, the worker is helped to recognize how his thoughts, feelings, and values interfere with hearing what the client is trying to communicate to him. The worker responds, "I became overly anxious and began

to think for the client instead of with the client. I need to understand his reality as a 16 year old who sees the world through the eyes of a 7 year-old."

Even partially successful culturally competent interventions are better than no culturally competent interventions at all. For example, an African-American social worker facilitating a group of women of color who are HIV+ is frustrated by the lack of progress in the group. She bombards the group with literature, films, and speakers, and is very controlling of the topics discussed in the group. The supervisor praises the worker for all her work on formulating and launching this important group experience for the women, but cautions the worker to let the group run itself, and to listen and learn about what being a woman of color and HIV+ means to group members.

Mastery of Stage III leads to the emergence of the art of social work, the ongoing acquisition of the art that allows the social work practitioner "as a person in his own right, [to] be able so to enter into the situation of his client that he does not disrupt what is there, but enhances the ability of the people who live in it to play their part . . . The acquisition of the art is not quickly learned. It is a lifelong and growing achievement" (Reynolds, 1942, p. 53).

Stage IV	"I understand what I am doing and use a range of culturally competent knowledge, skills and values."	Relative Mastery of Cultural Competence
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Reynolds believed that very few workers ever get to this stage of relative mastery, the science of social work, in which they can both understand and control their own activity in the art of social work. Only a handful of supervisors may ever see workers achieve this stage. It is particularly difficult to arrive at this stage since workers always know more about culturally competent practice than they can actually use at any given time. Practitioners learn to hear and feel more than they can explain from both a knowledge and skills base. Social work does not involve procedures that can be standardized nor does it rely on techniques which are standardized. Social work is an art form based in theory.

The goal of this stage is to both understand and control professional activity or actions or in Reynolds' words ". . . what was new in the experience has really become a part of the person" (1942, p. 81). Workers are no longer preoccupied with themselves nor are they fearful of what the experience will do to them. They know they can handle

new experiences, they understand what these experiences mean and what they demand of them. Workers can think of themselves in a new way, objectively, open to self-reflection, and able to criticize their actions and alter approaches as situations demand. New skills are integrated with old, acquired skills, and workers are able to respond with natural, genuine emotional responses. "Conscious intelligence and unconscious emotional responses are working together in an integrated wholeness of functioning" (*ibid.*). The science of cultural competence has been learned and integrated with the workers' professional knowledge, skills and values. Culturally competent practice activities become second nature to workers, and their emotional responses are disciplined and connected to professional purpose.

But cultural competence is never "finished" for, as Reynolds cautions, "there is always something new to be mastered" (1942, p. 82). Stereotypical thinking is still possible despite a well-developed cultural self-awareness. There are constant challenges to accustomed ways of thinking or feeling. Supervisors are frequently faced with the need to remind workers of their limitations along with their accomplishments and the need to continue to strive for culturally competent standards of practice. Supervisory meetings around cultural competence may take on a different tone and character during Stage IV as both supervisor and worker attempt to define and clarify culturally competent skills and knowledge. A worker asks his supervisor, "Was I wrong to disclose to her that I too was born of Russian, Jewish parents?" The supervisor responds, "How might this help or hinder your relationship in the future? Commonalities like speaking the same language and sharing the same ethnic roots may establish instant rapport with clients, but will it have other impacts as well?" Or take, for example, the worker who notices an increasing number of people of the Moslem faith seeking services, and the supervisor responds by organizing an in-service training session for staff to learn more about the Moslem religion. Or the agency that collaborates with community healers in the provision of mental health services for clients. These are examples of social workers setting the standards for practice and service delivery with diverse client populations. Workers and supervisors do not hesitate to seek consultation from experts as a way of preparing themselves for the work ahead. In this stage, supervisors and workers remind themselves that cultural competence is defined by the daily struggles of practice which are invaluable contributions to the growing knowledge base of culturally competent professionals.

Stage V	"I can teach others to be culturally competent practitioners or supervisors."	Teacher/Learner of Cultural Competence
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This stage deals with the ability to teach what one has mastered and the prevailing idea that what one knows one can teach, which is not always the case. Reynolds believed that, "When education is oriented to the person who is to learn plus the situation to be mastered, there is something more to teaching than proving to the learner that one knows the subject" (1942, p. 83). In other words, it is not so much the teachers' intelligence that is essential to learning, but that teachers are most effective when they understand different learning needs and are able to release the learners' intelligence. The best teachers understand the issues and concerns of the person who is learning, see how each worker learns best, find out what motivates a person to learn, appreciate what the person knows and what they still need to learn, and know when they are needed and when they are in the way (*ibid.*).

Supervisors often find themselves plunging in for better or worse (Stage II) with no idea how to help workers with cultural competence questions and dilemmas. Their only hope is to listen to the workers and be there for them. At other times, supervisors may find themselves helping workers handle cultural encounters quite effectively (Stage III) or they think they know how to be culturally competent teachers or administrators (Stage IV). Social work supervisors and educators are at their best when they are learning too, are in close touch with practice, and when they enjoy helping others develop their own practice knowledge and skills.

Reynolds would have supported the Freirian (1973) model of partner-teachers in which students are encouraged to speak in their own active voices and to think for themselves, as opposed to the traditional model of "banking" or filling students up with the teachers' knowledge. Reynolds would also have appreciated the feminist approach to "connected teaching" which welcomes diversity of opinion recognizing "that each of us has a unique perspective that is in some sense irrefutably 'right' by virtue of its existence" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 222). This approach constructs truth through consensus, feeling or sensing together, bridging private and shared experience.

There is a reciprocal flow of engagement between social workers in interaction with others and from others back to workers for the purpose of enabling workers to use everything they know to further their practice. Reynolds called this interconnectedness which she described as a constantly flowing reflective loop of teaching and learning. Bogo

and Vayda (1987) refer to this as the cyclical learning experience in which theory is integrated with practice. This concept of fluidity and connectedness is the life-giving force of the work of social workers.

Reynolds believed that if a teacher can be guided by what is happening to the learner rather than by what she wants to accomplish, she will be in a position to really teach. Classroom instructors, field instructors, and supervisors must aim to engage students and workers in authentic and mutually validating relationships within which both feel sufficient trust to share their ideas and personal reactions and the freedom to experiment. The teacher as a person is able to risk emotional encounters or threatening relationships, enabling workers to view her as an ordinary person in pursuit of culturally competent practice goals. Supervisors may find it necessary to acknowledge ignorance or to admit an error or concede fear. They must also be willing to increase tension, confront workers, and be prepared for the unexpected.

A culturally competent teacher-supervisor can help social workers cycle through these five stages as they develop their own authentic culturally competent voices. This is done by: (1) emphasizing understanding, acceptance and collaboration; (2) respecting workers' daily struggles; (3) allowing time for culturally competent practice knowledge to emerge from firsthand practice experiences; (4) not imposing their own expectations and requirements for cultural competence; and (5) by encouraging workers to evolve their own pattern of cultural competence based on the problems and issues they are pursuing in practice. The Five Stages of Learning and Teaching Cultural Competence require teacher-supervisors who can listen to the voices of the social workers which in turn engenders social workers who can listen to the voices of their diverse constituencies.

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